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Social Justice Activism in the Heartland of Hate: Countering Extremism in Alberta

This article addresses Alberta's conservative political and social milieu with attention to teachers engaged with their students in school activism on social justice issues. Its purpose is to shed light on the experiences of teachers who address extremism through school-based activism with young people. A brief historical overview of Canada's racist past includes a focus on Alberta's specific regional political scene and on hate-group activities over the past several decades. The effect is traced of this past on contemporary discourses about diversity. Examples of responses to diversity backlash and extremism are offered with reference to a particular student social justice program and current research that studies diversity activism in Canadian schools. Excerpts from interviews with teacher activists address how their work is affected by this context as they implement social justice initiatives in schools.

Cet article porte sur l'implication par des enseignants dans l'activisme étudiant visant des questions de justice sociale dans le contexte du milieu politique et social conservateur de l'Alberta. L'objectif en est d'éclairer les expériences des enseignants qui abordent l'extrémisme en participant à l'activisme étudiant à l'école. Un survol historique du racisme au Canada expose l'échiquier politique régional de l'Alberta et les activités des groupes haineux depuis plusieurs décennies. Nous évoquons l'effet de ce passé sur les discours contemporains portant sur la diversité et offrons des exemples de réactions défavorables face à la diversité et d'extrémisme en faisant référence tant à un programme de justice sociale pour étudiants qu'à la recherche actuelle sur l'activisme dans les écoles au Canada. Des entrevues auprès d'enseignants activistes évoquent l'effet de ce contexte sur leur travail de mise en oeuvre d'initiatives de justice sociale dans les écoles.

Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can't murder hate.
Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that.
(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Alberta's infamous conservative milieu clearly creates some obstacles for those educators and researchers engaged in activism on issues of social justice and diversity. School groups tackling racism and other forms of discrimination will find in the province a number of sources of resistance to their efforts. Of course, Alberta has not cornered the market on extremist views in North America, and there are many remarkably dedicated individuals who work tirelessly in an active social justice community in the province. However, an undeniable historical past has shaped a contemporary political and social context that often disrupts efforts toward equity. From the settler colonizing of the West through its history of racist extremism in both fringe and mainstream political movements, Alberta has long been a comfortable place for many who hold negative views on its ever-increasing diversity.

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Opinion polls and political analysts confirm the sentiment that "the majority of Albertans are considerably more right-wing than their fellow Canadians" (Jeffrey, 1999, p. 106). Students and teachers who tackle social justice issues in Canadian schools and communities will inevitably face barriers in their work (Alladin, 1996; Corson, 2000; Dei & Calliste, 2000). Learning from Alberta school activists how their work is affected by this extreme context seems a valuable undertaking in the light of the importance of creating schools that are safe and equitable for all learners. My purpose in writing this article is not to criticize the province in which I was raised and now call home; rather, I hope to shine some light both on the forces that push against equity and inclusion and on the efforts of educators and their students working to promote the value of diversity in schools and communities. Perhaps educators and activists in similarly conservative contexts will be encouraged to take up similar projects that face the challenges of implementing antiracist activism in hostile social climates.

Undertaking school research about issues of social justice entails an integrative theoretical and political stance that seeks intersections across emerging notions of, and struggles around, race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other categories of social identity and conflict (Dei & Calliste, 2000; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). I have intentionally positioned my research as a vehicle for both understanding and facilitating solidarity in social justice activism and as an instrument of community-building among a committed community of teachers and students. Accordingly, this article examines the activities of an activist student group and the views of teacher activists who have undertaken collaborative projects in the conservative heartland of Alberta. They articulate their perceptions of the merits, needs, and requirements of an activist, antiracist educational agenda in the province of Alberta.

An Albertan History of Hate

A long history of extremism and hate group activity in Alberta is downplayed in current discourses on education for social justice. Baergen (2000) notes, "Alberta continues to struggle with heavy historical baggage in its quest to overcome racism" (p. 284). In her book *Social Discredit*, Stingel (2000) analyzes and exposes the anti-Semitic campaigns of Alberta's Social Credit party, even in the wake of World War II and the Nazi Holocaust. Sweeping to power in 1935, winning 56 out of 63 seats in the provincial election, Social Credit held Alberta's political leadership until 1971. Although there were several reasons for its popularity in the province, the fact remains that "Social Credit was the only democratically elected party in Canada whose political and economic philosophies were based on anti-Semitism" (p. 4).

Even in the decade before the Social Credit's heyday, the province of Alberta was embraced by an infamous manifestation of organized hatred:

> A darker side of Alberta that is not commonly part of the outsider's perception, having been largely overlooked by both academic and popular historians, is a semblance of the Ku Klux Klan mentality—a, religious and racial bigotry that penetrated society far beyond the Ku Klux Klan membership and which emerged during Alberta's formative years when its foundation Anglo-Saxon stock felt its racial purity threatened by a wave of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants. (Baergen, 2000, pp. 11-12)

It must be noted here that other provinces across Canada also had chapters of the Klan and that not all the public support they received was based on their notions of racial purity. Anti-Catholic sentiments were at least as prevalent in the prairie Klan groups (Baergen). Alberta's press editors did not universally support the Klan or the more virulent anti-Semitic views of Social Credit (Stingel, 2000).

Nevertheless, the Klan did enjoy more widespread support than has been suggested by those who seek to dismiss them as an aberration; Baergen (2000) asserts, "this failure to treat the Klan's presence as representative of a widespread sentiment constitutes an alteration of history" (p. 8). Baergen's historical research reveals that in Alberta, "many 'red-necks' and 'Bible-thumpers' either openly endorsed the Klan mentality or gave it tacit approval. … The image, then, of a somewhat naïve ninety-nine percent pure society—an image we have protected—does not withstand scrutiny" (p. 12). Alberta is also the only Canadian jurisdiction on record to have granted a formal charter to the KKK—effectively making its white supremacist activities legal—and it did so twice.

Alberta's discriminatory past continues to influence current political and public discourse against the French language, immigration, and homosexuals, for example (Valpy, 2004). Furthermore, there has been a recent resurgence in racist hate groups in Alberta and elsewhere in Canada. Kinsella (2001) reports that Internet hate sites have exploded from just one in 1995 to over 3,000 in 2000. He posits that, "as Canada's racist right has become increasingly visible, and increasingly violent, I believe that it has grown to become a significant social problem" (pp. 4-5). Now these are extremists and do not as such represent mainstream perspectives. And although it is important not to dismiss issues of racism in Canadian society by pointing to extremists, these views do exist as part of a continuum of contemporary attitudes on difference. Attending to the more extreme views and responding to them appropriately can become one aspect of organized antiracist initiatives.

Further muddying the current discourse on antiracist education is a pervasive but erroneous notion that Canada has long stood for harmony and the acceptance of diversity. Others such as Boyko (1995) have noted our national tendency to underplay our racist past: "Canadians are often guilty of ignoring or warping our past while sanctimoniously feeling somewhat removed from, and superior to, countries struggling with racial problems and harbouring histories marked by slavery or racial violence" (p. 15). Beginning with the first European settlers arriving in Canada, systematic discrimination has been practiced against individuals and groups based on racist ideologies. These immigrants promoted ethnocentric views, imposed a version of British cultural norms, and began the colonization of First Nations peoples. Official government policies entrenched racial segregation in schools and racialized immigration restrictions. Popular support buoyed laws supporting anti-Semitism, the mistreatment of Chinese immigrant railway workers, and the displacement and internment of Japanese-Canadians (Boyko, 1995; Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 1995; Ward, 1992). Facing this past is an important first step for all Canadians, and Tupper's (2002) work with school history texts offers a promis-

ing exemplar. A more immediate need for Alberta's diversity activists is to confront the intolerance promoted by its own government.

Alberta's Recent Demographic and Political Context

Alberta has seen a growing diversity over the past, with the changing demographics reflecting immigration trends across Canada (Statistics Canada, 2001). Based on 2001 Census data, the number of Canadians who identify themselves as visible minority by ethic origin has grown in Alberta to over 11% of the population. When combined with those identifying themselves as First Nations or Aboriginal, the total nonwhite population is now 17% of Albertans: roughly equal to the overall Canadian statistics (Statistics Canada). Most significantly, since the 1996 Census, the combined total number of Aboriginal and visible-minority Albertans has grown by approximately 20%. Alberta's urban areas remain the most popular destination for new arrivals and for migration patterns in the Aboriginal population for a variety of reasons, and this has significant implications for urban communities and schools.

The resulting changes in the ethnocultural diversity makeup of the cities of Alberta have been a factor in growing social tensions, often manifested along racialized lines. Recent regional studies and community surveys have found a growing hostility toward some persons based on their ethnic and racial identity (Pruegger & Kiely, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2003; Toneguzzi & Zickefoose, 2004; Williamson, 2004). The implications for schools are outlined by Pruegger and Kiely, who conducted interviews with 106 Calgary youths aged 12-24 years and found that "all the youth we spoke with could describe incidents of discrimination they either experienced directly or witnessed" (p. 17) and a "common theme in the youths' narratives was the perpetuation of discrimination by teachers and the schools" (p. 19). They conclude that school personnel "need to work with community to ensure that schools are safe and affirming places for all students" (p. 33). In the face of these pressing needs, the political government of this province remains apparently uncommitted to taking a leadership role in organized efforts toward eliminating racism.

Since his election in 1992, Alberta's Conservative Premier Ralph Klein has led a populist movement referred to as the "Klein Revolution," cloaked in fiscal conservatism while implementing a social agenda that many view as hostile to diversity issues. As an example, the Alberta government's adamant refusal until 1998 to include sexual orientation among the grounds for discrimination in its human rights act is emblematic of a narrow mindset among members of the government and general public alike. In his analysis of Klein's policies since taking office, Jeffrey (1999) summarizes the resultant effect on social cohesion:

> One of the most disturbing aspects of the Klein Revolution has been the rapid descent to the lowest common denominator in public discourse and the increased influence in government of moral conservatives from the religious right. This disastrous combination has led to an unprecedented degree of scapegoating, attacks on minorities and "special interests" by the political leadership of the province. (p. 131)

Indeed, in the past decade numerous cabinet members and backbench Conservatives have openly criticized immigration policy, bilingualism, multicultural

programming, human rights legislation, and language programs for immigrants, and several have expressed in the media their open hostility toward the idea of fair treatment of gays and lesbians in this province. As one Alberta journalist observed,

> As with so many other things the Klein government has borrowed from America, it seems also to have borrowed the right wing's renewed focus on race, immigration and ethnic diversity … Klein has recognized the political value of intemperance and has played on the public's fears. (Helmer, cited in Jeffrey, 1999, p. 105)

In virtually every instance of expressed intolerance, "time and again the premier has simply remained silent, stood aside and watched developments unfold" (Jeffrey, pp. 131-132).

Klein's recent conservative reforms in Alberta have already significantly affected school, municipal, and provincial multicultural policies and programming. As one example, Klein's cabinet initiated legislation that terminated the Alberta Multiculturalism Commission (AMC). Klein's cabinet ministers contradicted their own reports from a public review when they passed Bill 24 in July 1996. Using the undemocratic method of "forcing closure" on debate in the legislature, Klein rescinded the province's Multiculturalism Act. Even though fiscal restraint was stated as the impetus for such targeted cuts, this excuse was disingenuous considering that funds for the AMC came from a burgeoning lottery fund rather than the general provincial budget. In the years since the termination of the AMC, virtually none of Alberta's annual multi-billion dollar surpluses has found its way into community programming or education for diversity.

Volunteer community groups including the Central Alberta Diversity Association, the Northern Alberta Alliance on Race Relations, and the Alberta Association for Multicultural Education continue their ambitious nonprofit diversity work in the province, but all have been affected by the discontinuation of all program funding from traditional government sources such as Alberta Community Development and Canadian Heritage. Similarly, the Cultural Diversity Institute (CDI) founded in the University of Calgary in 1998 from the ashes of the AMC, struggled for years with funding during a time of reduced government support and limited budgets for postsecondary education. Last year the CDI closed its doors permanently. Although some government and community organizations addressing diversity still exist in Alberta, many of them have faced cuts in recent years.

One promising development is the establishment of a Diversity, Equity and Human Rights (DEHR) committee in the Alberta Teachers' Association (2005). DEHR has organized several initiatives including an invitational provincial symposium, a summer institute, an anti-discrimination policy, and resources for educators. In addition, other nongovernmental agencies continue to promote the acceptance of differences through a variety of educational initiatives. One small example is the Central Alberta Historical Society's support of Baergen's (2000) text, along with a related teaching resource (Lund, 2002) and a series of inservice workshops for educators. Over the past two years, hundreds of Alberta teachers have learned more about Alberta's racist past while being

encouraged to eliminate racism and other forms of discrimination in their daily practice.

Teachers Tackle Extremism

In a recent study I conducted with 11 Alberta teacher and student activists exploring a number of issues related to social justice activism (Lund, 2001), we addressed responses to the anti-diversity backlash and conservative climate that permeate our region. As reported elsewhere in greater detail (Lund, 2003, in press), young people involved with fighting racism in their schools and communities show an acute awareness of the conservative mindset that currently fuels extreme backlashes against some specific issues they may tackle in the field of social justice education. In the section below I share a related example from my own experience with collaborative antiracism activism, followed by excerpts from interviews with the four teacher activists.

In the mid-1980s, a group of students in one of my English classes at Lindsay Thurber Comprehensive High School in Red Deer created an effective and national award-winning model to challenge racism and other forms of discrimination in a potentially volatile social climate. Now in its 20th school year Students and Teachers Opposing Prejudice (STOP) continues to engage students, teachers, parents, administration, other school staff, government, media, and community agencies in a collective effort. Initial national media interest in the group was probably due to central Alberta's unfortunate widespread reputation for extremist hate group activity, worth reviewing briefly below.

Right-wing extremists had catapulted Red Deer into the collective national consciousness with media coverage of Terry Long, Canadian leader of the Aryan Nations group, then running a "white power" training camp at nearby Caroline. Long had also for over a year run a classified advertisement in the local daily newspaper promoting a prerecorded "hate hot line." Red Deer also hosted the trials and appeals of teacher James Keegstra, an unrepentant Holocaust denier convicted in 1985 for promoting hatred in his Eckville high school social studies classes. In 1990, STOP members traveled to Provost, a town about an hour east of Red Deer, to work with student leaders there after a highly publicized Aryan Nations cross-burning at a hate rally.

When the national head of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Toronto presented STOP with a "Courage to Remember" 40-poster series on the Holocaust, the response from Long made the front page of the local newspaper. Numerous cars in the school parking lot were defaced with KKK brochures, and STOP continued to receive revisionist "historical" evidence and pseudo-scientific studies in the mail. I have received personal correspondence from both Long and Keegstra, as well as other extremists, disapproving of my ongoing efforts to educate young people on social justice issues.

Other STOP activities have included awareness campaigns on violence against women, discrimination against gays and lesbians, and Alberta's dismal human rights record. Specific student and teacher activism has included interrogation of school policies and curriculum materials, presentations to government officials, drama presentations to children, organizing local protests, international human rights advocacy, and public debates with political leaders

on government policies (Canadian Race Relations Foundation, 2001; Lund, 1998).

STOP members twice invited our local MLA, ousted Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day, to meet with them at the high school. On one occasion they countered his attack on Canada's bilingual policies and later challenged his blocking of Alberta's ratification of the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child. Their solid research and debating skills shone during both events, the latter covered by CBC radio, but more impressive to me was how undaunted these young people appeared in their wrangling with an especially confident and single-minded politician infamous for voicing his narrow views on diversity issues (Kossowan, 1994).

In the STOP experiences described above, and as documented in my own ongoing research, both teachers and students have taken action on specific community issues of racism and discrimination in ways that respond directly to extremism and community backlash on diversity. The conservative political climate that could well inhibit antiracism activism actually seems to provide an additional incentive for some to step up their efforts and confront narrow views and oppressive structures wherever they appear.

Voices of Teacher Activists

For this research I interviewed student and teacher activists engaged in social justice and diversity projects in their schools and communities around Alberta. I identified four teacher activists using "community nomination," finding most through a loose network of teacher colleagues, professional associations, and community activists. Participants in this research had antiracism experience ranging from one to 25 years. They came from rural, smaller urban, and large urban settings and a variety of ethnocultural backgrounds. Their ethnic and geographic locations undoubtedly shaped and informed their understandings in complex ways to be explored in future analyses.

Over a period of about two years I conducted semistructured interviews with participants; data gathering included site visits and at least two hours of in-depth conversation with each participant. Our talks were tape-recorded, transcribed, and offered to the participants for validation or revision for accuracy. Besides some minor corrections related to clarity and grammar, relatively few changes were made to the original transcripts. Data were coded, analyzed, and subjected to validity requirements following Carspecken (1996). I believe my role as an "insider" and fellow antiracism activist helped to foster a reciprocal research relationship; our conversations represented another model of working collaboratively to understand better and encourage this challenging work in school settings.

The views of the student activists on countering diversity backlash are documented elsewhere (Lund, 2003, in press). The four teacher activists I interviewed each confirmed the current political climate as hostile to antiracism work and cited diminishing government and administrative support for social justice initiatives. Three of them noted that the media fosters negative stereotypes about young people and other marginalized groups and often fails to present a balanced picture of the positive initiatives going on in schools. They all spoke of the current political conservatism as contributing to a challenging situation for those who promote social justice in schools.

None of the teacher activists who participated in this research viewed the conservative political situation in Alberta as hopeless. In fact all four expressed a strong need for activists to offer a voice to counter the increasingly alarmist discourse on diversity. The long-time antiracist activists were especially frustrated with the current state of affairs for social justice work in schools, particularly when compared with past levels of support for this field. Selected responses from interviews with these teachers are included below as illustrative of how some teachers express their resistance to a conservative social context.

The names of participants mentioned here are pseudonyms. These accounts are written in the present tense to enhance the immediacy of their words. Ted is a white veteran social studies teacher from an urban high school who looks back fondly on the 1980s in particular as a heyday for multicultural education and the movement to promote the acceptance of differences. He was instrumental in forming a popular diversity leadership program adopted by the local school district. Ted reflects on possible explanations of greater past financial support for cultural programming:

> I think there were two things that contributed to its "heyday-ishness," if that's a word. One was that the political will was much stronger at that point, and the economics were different. So I think that we were a society then that was much more concerned with egalitarian things, and less with fiscal restraint. I think we were also more concerned with social issues, and our concerns now are much more individual issues. Even the issues surrounding equity now are not based in terms of group rights but in terms of individual rights.

It follows for Ted that the teachers who choose to address diversity issues directly may find themselves in a tenuous position if controversial subjects arise. According to Ted, a professional existence on the margins of the contemporary educational milieu provides even white mainstream teacher activists with a taste of the marginalization they rally against:

> Without the authority, without the legitimizing, we who like to work in this area are very much put into the same sort of thing—and I don't want to compare in any way our experiences on a real base level—but we get a glimpse of what it's like to be the recipient of racism in our society.

Far from causing such activists to cease their efforts, this continual "going against the grain" of the more conservative mainstream seems to reinforce further the imperative nature of continued activism.

Current school diversity efforts do not usually enjoy the kind of generous financial support that multicultural programming enjoyed just a few decades ago, a situation that Ted relates to systemic power issues that are difficult to expose and counteract.

> Economic issues really raise their head, and really cause systemic racism to raise its head. What are you going to cut back? Usually it's the voiceless. And that tends to be involved with certain cultural groups. Those people who are in power are going to be the last ones to have [programs cut]; it's the same thing as the rule of the majority, the tyranny of the majority. So I think systemic issues take a tremendous amount of will, and are done more in economically flush times, or in times that are perceived to be economically flush. That's why

> I think in the 1980s we got to some of those issues, just on the edge of systemic stuff.

His awareness of systemic issues underlying racism has somewhat inhibited his school-based activism in student projects toward social justice. He is currently more interested in issues of school leadership not as directly connected to direct activism with student programs. Ted says that school activists who hope to be successful at combating racism will somehow have to address how pervasive and embedded racism has become in our society.

Ted criticizes the past "glory days" of multicultural programming as focusing on the subjects of the programs as passive, or worse, as undeserving recipients of government handouts. This led to its inevitable downfall, he believes, but the current conservatism and backlash can be reframed as an opportunity to introduce these concepts with a different emphasis.

> The image of the whole thing that was the undoing of it was: "These people are on the take" and I think that's absolutely backwards. These people are wanting in. They want to be able to give, because that's where dignity comes from. Dignity doesn't come from a handout; it comes from contributing. So that's the message that should come out, that we need all the pistons firing in our society, so let's find out how these people can contribute.

Other teacher activists who are members of minority groups seem to experience a different perspective on the current role of a conservative climate on their activism in schools. For Bonnie, her daily experiences as a Black teacher and diversity educator in an urban junior high school have been rewarding. She plans a number of annual events with her students including an ongoing peer mentoring and leadership program with a focus on ethnocultural role models. Their collaborative group also organizes a series of educational and celebratory events around Black History Month and other commemorative days highlighting ethnocultural and other diversities.

These experiences also remind her of the pervasive narrow-mindedness in her community. She says that people regularly make assumptions about her based on stereotyped notions and describes an illustrative scenario.

> I've had at least six experiences since I've been in this building, and unfortunately it's all been white parents. A person walks in and says to me, "Do you know where I could find a teacher?" [she laughs] Sometimes I play the game too, and go into the office, and the secretary who kind of knows my background and such, she'll get all red because she knows that I'm playing a game. And while I think that's not fair to her, I do get peeved at situations like those when they happen too frequently. To me one time is too frequently! But the scary part was when I shared that story, and the comeback at me was, why did I think the person was implying I wasn't a teacher? I'm thinking, of the staff member who asked that: "Where are you coming from?" So you get that ripple effect and you think, where are people coming from?

Critically analyzing such incidents, Bonnie questions both the behavior and underlying values of those around her. As a long-time antiracist activist, she typically brushes off the conservatism she sees and continues her rewarding collaborative project work with students. Occasionally, however, she admits that she gets "worn down" by the mainstream white mentality that she says denigrates her based on her skin color. She concedes,

> This is where I'm coming from, this is where some of that tiredness is coming from and I need [others] to understand how wearing it can be when you're feeling that you're giving it your all concentration and you turn around and here we go again. It could have been your best morning and something like that just shot it to hell, depending on the space you're in. Like I said, most times I can just chuckle at it and make some fast comeback, and life continues. But there are those times that usually signal I've been too entrenched, where I just say, "whoops, that just hit me much harder that it has hit me for the last six months."

Her solution is to retreat from the daily activism, the daily struggles with combating racist views and behaviors, and to rebuild her own vitality. Perhaps playfully, she says she tells herself, "I need to just go to a dance, and that's what I mean by re-energizing myself!"

Cathy teaches in a high school in a small town in southern Alberta. Single and white, she has taught for one year in Southeast Asia and has taken courses in diversity issues as part of her education to become a teacher. She has taught in Alberta for four years in both the sciences and humanities and is currently the coordinator of a group of students who participate in an annual diversity leadership camp and organize the school's diversity awareness activities. Cathy proudly notes her status as an eighth generation Canadian of British heritage, but says she has been mistaken for having First Nations ancestry on more than one occasion.

In Cathy's rural high school, she and some of her colleagues did not believe that their homogeneous and mostly white school could have any concerns about racism: "A lot of people don't really think that racism is a problem at all at [our school]." However, the results of a school-wide survey on which one question was included about students' personal experiences with racism came as a shock to Cathy and her principal. She explains, "We've never thought of having a racism problem because we're basically all white!" Her comments reflect a view that increased diversity based on visible physical characteristics will lead to more problems in the school, echoing the problematic discourse about difference that often equates ethnocultural diversity with discord in education.

Cathy says that her group's efforts to expose and eliminate racism face internal obstacles in the light of their school's demographics. She says the rural students they serve are "very set in their ways" and reports, "With them I find that I don't see any blatant racism throughout the school, but when we try to do diversity events, there are some who seem like they could care less." Cathy also admits that her own relatively limited experience with diversity has also affected her ability to identify or fully understand potentially racist situations. She says she is just beginning to analyze some of the entrenched racism that exists in our contemporary society, especially in her home community in rural Alberta.

Similarly, Gail describes herself as a WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) who has a strong interest in promoting the acceptance of differences. She is a senior high school teacher at a small urban setting in central Alberta, where she coordinates a student action group that regularly tackles diversity issues. Gail has taught in several schools in rural and smaller urban settings over the past

15 years, in social studies, French immersion, and English language arts at the junior and senior high school levels. A married parent of two children, she also traveled with her family for two years as part of an international teacher exchange program.

In her small Alberta town, Gail also finds challenges in addressing racism both in her classes and in her activist student group. Her group typically chooses "multicultural" activities designed to build an awareness of their community's growing diversity. She says she finds her students reluctant to address racialized differences. She offers a specific example from a few years ago.

> During the first year I taught, my students had to write all these statements about themselves, and I had this one student who said, "I'm the one who's chocolate," and I thought, wow, that's really cool. And every time I see her I think, she's the color of my favorite kind of chocolate! And she calls attention to it herself, almost because, people will see she's Black but they don't want to say Black. Or if kids are Chinese they don't want to say Chinese because they think it's politically incorrect.

Gail sees a situation developing in her fairly homogeneous white rural school that she recognizes is happening elsewhere. Mainstream media sources have created a heightened state of racialized awareness among students with media coverage of accusations of racist police, equity legislation, racism in the music business, immigration debates, and racism in the army. Yet somehow the discourse on color and racism in our public schools has almost become taboo, partly over students' fears of stirring up controversy by frankly addressing particularities of difference.

Undefeated by a conservative climate that often devalues or ignores those outside the mainstream, Bonnie, Ted, Cathy, and Gail represent the resilient and persistent activists who struggle on their uphill climb. The heavy load can be tiring at times, but the journey is made more bearable with the assistance of others on the same path, and the guiding vision of the summit fuels the passion to continue. Like other activists I interviewed and with whom I have worked, Bonnie recognizes the limitations and barriers imposed by the current political context, with diminishing resources for antiracism programming and negative portrayals of marginalized groups. However, they all convey how their own ongoing activism is answering a call to keep addressing social justice issues through their school-based coalitions.

Conclusion

Despite their acknowledgment of the extremism and conservatism that characterize the current social and political provincial context, each teacher with whom I spoke found sources of strength and determination amid a community mentality that often devalues or denies discussions of social justice issues. My own work in a community known for its extremist right-wing activities also supports the importance of providing a countervailing voice for acceptance and equity. The effect of a pro-diversity program on the self-esteem of students whose cultural background or racialized physical identity places them outside of the mainstream cannot be overstated.

Ted reminds us that antiracist activist teachers and students play an important role in contemporary society to give voice to issues that are often marginalized by the dominant mainstream. He sees narrow-mindedness behind much of the current discourse about diversity issues in the public. His efforts over the years have been toward infusing antiracism in every class he teaches, and highlighting the educative value of social justice reforms so that social justice becomes more than an add-on component that can be dropped in a moment.

Having to face racism and stereotyped views on an almost daily basis has helped Bonnie to realize the vital importance of her work, but it has also taken its emotional toll. She admits to feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the task ahead of her in this field, especially as the political landscape continues to throw up barriers to her work toward social justice. Nonetheless, Bonnie maintains her enthusiasm in organizing student action groups by concentrating her efforts on raising students' awareness of diversity issues and building their individual leadership skills.

Both Cathy and Gail face daily struggles with the unspoken limits placed on their school activism in a relatively homogeneous and conservative community setting. Addressing contentious issues of racism and difference, particularly from the position of mainstream white identities, holds a unique set of challenges that both of these activists continue to face in their collaborative work with students.

Although promising reports of students' and teachers' initiatives regularly appear in activist magazines such as *Our Schools/Our Selves*, relatively little academic attention has been paid to school antiracism activism in Canada. Even in volumes promising the study of struggles for equality in education in Canada and elsewhere, such as collections by Alladin (1996) and Roman and Eyre (1997), there are no studies of antiracism coalitions formed by students and teachers in secondary schools. Missing from the current theorizing about race, culture, and difference in Canada is an acknowledgment of the tremendous potential of young people to formulate and implement antiracist activism in schools and communities. A task for antiracist educators, scholars, and other adults is to seek new forms of establishing respectful engagements with their young counterparts in the mutual struggle for social justice.

Following the lead of Gillborn (1995) in the United Kingdom and SooHoo (1996) in the United States, this research builds on a relatively new direction in antiracism work that focuses on young people not simply as participants or consumers, but as engaged leaders in social justice activism. Gillborn's research showed that "students can play an active role in antiracist policy formation; not only questioning staff and school assumptions, but becoming antiracist in their own interactions with peers and teachers" (p. 175). SooHoo found that many educators systematically devalue students' voices, making "unilateral decisions on what constitutes worthwhile knowledge because they lack faith and trust in students' capabilities" (p. 218). Her research engaged students as key informants and active collaborators or co-researchers throughout the investigation, and her results showed that, "by empowering students with research responsibilities, voice was given to a group who historically have not been part of the research community" (p. 219).

From the work of these researchers and the views of the four teachers reported above emerges an instructive modeling of the cooperativeness they seek to foster in others. Attending to their antiracism experiences in actual school settings brings academic attention to social justice initiatives that is long overdue in the field of education. Young (1995), for example, has lamented "while some faculty members have taken part in the critique of school practices (and have build academic careers theorizing about such practices) our own worksites and practices have been virtually ignored and left beyond critique" (p. 45). This article is intended as a step toward revealing and sharing the wisdom of school-based antiracism activists working in inhospitable environments. These activists may be challenged by the narrow views and conservative climate around them, but they remain committed to shining a bright light on hate and extremism in their schools and communities through nonviolent and educative collaboration.

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